

## **Comedy and Commerce: Ancient Economies in the Light of Comic Texts from Classical Greece to Imperial Rome**

Comic texts – comedies, satires, collections fables or dicta – are an unlikely, yet, on closer inspection, enormously rewarding source to understand business in the ancient Greco-Roman world. An international conference, to be held on 9 to 10 April 2026 in Cologne, Germany, will focus on the methodological opportunities and challenges of this peculiar type of source material and discuss its contribution to new approaches to ancient economies.

Do comedy and commerce go together? Not at first glance. Comedy is based on the artful disappointment of expectations – laughter is elicited by surprise. Commerce – the commercial sale and rental of goods and services –, instead, is based on the certainty of expectations: the fulfilment of contracts, the building of trust, the ability to plan cooperation. When it comes to money, nobody wants to be ‘taken for a ride’ or ‘made a fool of’. But precisely because commerce is ‘serious business’ it lends itself so well to comedy: by turning the rules of business life on their head or by parodying them. With its formulaic language and everyday practices, commerce also provides raw material for jokes in another respect, since to surprise, the joke must build on established everyday knowledge. Finally, dishonest business practices and dubious businessmen provided a prime target for ridicule. This was especially true in Greco-Roman societies, which looked with contempt or suspicion on foreigners, social climbers and overly enterprising contemporaries.

For all these reasons, comic texts are an excellent source for economic history, and their potential is far from exhausted. However, using this source requires a reflective engagement with specific methodological challenges: How do you identify a joke as a joke? How can legal formulae and economic practices be identified in texts? Which economic actions were considered to be in accordance with the rules? Which actors emerge as social types from satirical exaggeration? How do reflections of real-life and dramatic or literary devices interact in texts? Finally, there is the broad question of what metaphors and value judgements (or inversions) reveal about the norms of social transactions more generally.

The conference aims to discuss these questions in an interdisciplinary way, combining social, economic, and legal historical approaches with literary perspectives. The diachronic perspective from Classical Greece to Imperial Rome allows us to determine more precisely the interrelationship between contextual and genre-specific features. The guiding premise of the conference is that comic texts are one of the most important sources for economic history, which, after decades of focusing on institutions, is now turning to a history of perceptions and mentalities of economic activity. What the ancient Greeks and Romans laughed at reveals to us what they considered economically rational and conceivable in their everyday interactions.

### Potential topics:

- The literary structure of references to the movement of goods, use of money, occupational specialisation

- Literary/dramatic function of economic themes or concepts
- Evaluations of wealth and wealth inequality
- Evaluations of business practices, occupational groups, economic success
- Use of commercial metaphors
- Discourse on the norms of social transactions

Scholars of all career stages are cordially invited to send in proposals for a contribution to the conference. Talks are scheduled with 30-minute slots, with additional time for discussion. Publication of the papers as a collective volume is planned.

Applicants are kindly asked to send the title and outline of topic (ca. 300 words) of their proposal, together with a CV, to [dorothea.rohde@uni-koeln.de](mailto:dorothea.rohde@uni-koeln.de) and [M.Hinsch@lmu.de](mailto:M.Hinsch@lmu.de) by 6 April 2025.